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AUSTRALIAN ART REVIEW

Australian Art Prizes:
The list, the rules, their worth

Fan Dongwang:
Visual cross-cultural adventurer



Plus:
Wearable Art, Beyond Op Art,
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Emerging Bankability

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Post China Pop

Shanghai born artist and academic Fan Dongwang paints immense, pop inspired images that present a dazzling hybrid of cross cultural ideas. Curator and writer ROD PATTENDEN explores his complex iconography.



Vantage Point: The Art of Fan Dongwang
Macquarie University Art Gallery, Sydney
7 March to 15 April 2005
(Traveling to regional galleries through 2006)

The large-scale canvases of artist Fan Dongwang crackle and flash like colour field paintings switched to fast forward. There are stark shadows and vibrant contrasts buzzing in every corner. With electric urgency they pop out into the world of the viewer breaking apart the flatness of two-dimensional space. Dragons, floating bodies, technological transformation, monsters and Gods all hover for recognition in this dramatic field of cross-cultural ideas. These works appear like some postmodern billboard that is spilling out the debris of culture into the world of the viewer with all the seductive hype and gloss that they can conjure.

Fan Dongwang has been toiling away on this illuminating world of images in a small studio bedroom in suburban Sydney. He is barely able to reach around his large canvases and yet works with a meticulous care in crafting works punctuated with philosophical and cultural interest.

This small space has produced some big ideas that reflect his journey from his native Shanghai, China where he first studied low relief carving in ivory and jade, to the contemporary art scene of Australia and the completion of a Doctorate in Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong.

Dr Fan Dongwang may be one of Australia's most educated artists and he brings to his work a cross cultural sophistication that has tried to bridge the radical differences of history, religion and culture that exists between east and west. Rather than having developed some new hybrid personality, the artist has instead decided to make this complex history of the gap between China and Australia the content of his work. He has turned the personal struggle of finding a new home and identity in Australia into the wider story of making meaning in his art practice.

Meeting the artist is like having a discussion with a philosopher and sage rather than any kind of pop guru or cross-cultural adventurer. He greets my quizzical responses to the works that crowd his tiny studio with keen interest and sharp intellect prompting in me a deeper respect for his wide learning and cultural interests. His Doctoral studies centred

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on an analysis of shadows and their function to delineate perspective in both eastern and western traditions.

Because of this interest in shadows, the perspectives in his work are always shifting. There is no single vantage point from which the forms come together, no position of power or significance. A western visual education will assume there is one vantage point from which a painting will order the world that is laid out before us. In most traditions there is a clear hierarchy of power and allegiance that tells the viewer what role they play in the social order. By working with multiple perspectives and conflating both Chinese and western structures the artist is offering an analysis of the often unacknowledged ways in which we order our world of hopes, desires, attachments and allegiances.



Opposite page:

Descendants –
Red Environment #3
by Fan Dongwang. 2002.
151.50 x 151.50cm.

Below:

Dragon Head II by Fan
Dongwang. 2001. Acrylic
on canvas. 180 x 180 cm.
Image by Effy Alexakis.
2005.

Left:

Fan Dong Wang at work.
2005. Courtesy Effy
Alexakis.



These works contain the complex experience of the outsider who is able to see more clearly by their very difference, the fractured and conflicted nature of society. When things seem clear, when power seems self proclaimed and natural then perhaps we are most blind. It is the outsider, and in this case the artist, who will always be most dangerous to the accepted order of things. Our culture is not one – it is not seamless and self-evident. In reality it is conflicted and torn with competing debates and tensions. The gifted view of this artist is to lay out the complex nature of the visual environment of meaning and to remind us of its power to order our ability to see.

The stunning visual impact and the striking contrasts that these works contain are evidence of a sophisticated imagination concerned with the fundamental tensions inherent in a multicultural society. Fan Dongwang is a highly refined practitioner who presents a unique and complex vision. He provides, in the flash and brilliance of these works, a way of considering our own cultural identities in this current period of rapid change and the sometimes limiting and monochromatic effects of globalisation.